DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 299 EA 014 562

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TITLE Factors Influencing School Effectiveness: An Ecological Analysis of an "Effective" School.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982). Not available in paper copy due to small print of original document.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; Case Studies; Educational Environment; Elementary Education; Expectation; *Leadership; Observation; Parent School Relationship; *Principals; Questionnaires; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Ecological Psychology; *School Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

A case study of an effective, predominantly black, public elementary school in an eastern inner-city area, aimed to identify and define factors that relate to school effectiveness. The analytical method used, drawn from ecological psychology, emphasizes observing natural behavior in its normal environment and noting the links between the person and the environment. Information came from 35 structured interviews with students, administrators, educators, and parents and from behavioral observation in offices, classrooms, and other school areas. Data were gathered on interactions relating to leadership, instruction, expectations, school climate, evaluation, and parental involvement. The research results indicate that strong leadership from the principal was the most crucial factor in the school's effectiveness, especially as exhibited in the principal's impact on school climate, expectations, academic standards, and parent-school relations. A copy of the interview questionnaire is appended. (Author/RW)

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EA014 562

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Factors Influencing School Effectiveness:
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Introduction

Most large scale research investigating the relationship between school characteristics and student achievement has failed to discover within-school variables that distinguish between schools having high and low student achievement (Brookover, et al., 1977). Socioeconomic and race variables have been the only social input variables that contribute significantly to an explanation of differences in achievement between schools.

Thus it has been concluded by some (Jencks, et al., 1972) that schools do not make a difference. However these input-output studies have neglected to investigate within-school variables that might differentiate between effective and ineffective schools. When race and socio-economic composition are controlled, variables which contribute to different levels of achievement among low SES schools have been identified. Most of these "process" studies (Edmonds & Frederiksen, 1978; Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; State of New York, 1974; and Weber, 1971) have involved close observations of the workings of the school. The results constitute a body of knowledge which has become known as "school effectiveness" literature.

Objectives and Theoretical Framework

An ecological analysis of an "effective" school was conducted in order to identify and define factors that relate to school effectiveness.

For purposes of this study, an effective school is one in which a majority of students score at or above the national average on standardized achievement tests.

The theoretical context of this study is framed from two major sources of literature: school effectiveness research and ecological psychology. Effectiveness is a complex issue which is best understood as a set of interactive processes and conditions operant within the school community (Newberg, 1981). However, research studies have shown that certain major conditions existing within the school community are related to effective schools. These conditions include the principal as a strong educational leader, high expectations, a school-wide emphasis on high quality instruction in basic subjects, a reliable set of measures to indicate student progress, and parental interest and involvement (Brookover, 1978; Edmonds, 1979; and Rutter, 1977).

Based on a review of literature and the results of the Effective Schools Project (Edmonds & Frederiksen, 1978), Edmonds (1979) has summarized the most tangible and indespensable characteristics of effective schools:

(a) They have strong administrative leadership without which the disparate elements of good schooling can neither be brought together nor kept together;

(b) Schools that are instructionally effective for poor children have a climate of expectation in which no children are permitted to fall below minimum but efficacious levels of achievement;

(c) The school's atmosphere is orderly without being rigid, quiet without being oppressive, and generally conducive to the instructional business at hand;

(d) Effective schools get that way partly by making it clear that pupil acquisition of basic school skills takes precedence over all other school activities;

(e) When necessary, school energy and resources can be diverted from other business in furtherance of the fundamental objectives;

(f) There must be some means by which pupil progress can be frequently monitored. These means may be as traditional as classroom testing on the day's lesson or as advanced as criterion referenced systemwide standardized measures. The point is that some means must exist in the school by which the principal and the teachers remain constantly aware of pupil progress in relationship to instructional objectives. (p. 23)

Ecological psychology also provides the theoretical framework within which to study effective schools. Historically, an ecological perspective evolved gradually in applied behavioral analysis (Risley, 1977). What is known as ecological psychology is chiefly associated with Roger Barker (1968) although others have contributed to its development (Walsh, 1973). The basic rationale for Barker's theory of behavior is that environments select and shape the behavior of people who inhabit them. People tend to behave in highly similar ways in specific environments regardless of their individual differences (Barker, 1968; Mitchell, 1969). An ecological assessment of behavior implies the following: 1) the examination of naturally occurring behavior, 2) an examination of the environment immediately surrounding that behavior, and 3) an examination of the ways the person and environment are linked. Ecological assessment provides a useful perspective to view behavior and its causality within the environmental context (Carlson, Scott, & Ekland, 1980).

This research studied a school ecologically by focusing observations on the conditions which contribute to an effective school. Data

were collected through interviews and through observations in an attempt to understand interactions relating to leadership, expectations, instruction, climate, evaluation, and parental involvement.

Methods and Data Source

This study contributes to a larger examination of one inner-city elementary school in an eastern metropolitan city. For the past three years several research projects have been conducted to study various aspects of the school (Hymes, 1981). This research reports on one study of this school.

The school, with a predominantly black population of 1100 students, has received local and national recognition (New York Times, 1/6/80) as a school which consistently exceeds predicted achievement.

Structured interviews and behavioral observations were the major source of data. The structured interviews (see Appendix) were recorded on audio tape and consisted of questions formulated from the review of research on school effectiveness. A total of thirty-five interviews were conducted with persons representing all aspects of the school: students in various grades, teachers, the principal, staff, related professionals, and parents. The same questions, adjusted for age of respondent, were asked of each participant.

Behavioral observations were made by the investigator in various settings throughout the school: classroom, offices, playground, lunchroom, etc. Observations were made weekly over a three month period for a total of approximately thirty hours. Data was collected through an ethnographic approach recorded in narrative form.

The interviews were analyzed to establish likenesses and differences in responses and to identify specific themes. Observational data were studied to gain information not gathered through interviews and to substantiate interview data. For example, interview data indicated that the principal was highly visable and involved in all aspects of the school. Observations verified that the principal spent a large portion of time in classrooms, hallways, the lunchroom, and on the playground.

Results

The major theme which emerged from the study will be presented first followed by specific information related to each of the effectiveness characteristics.

The major finding was the extreme importance of leadership. Although effectiveness literature identifies the importance of strong leadership, this study indicated that leadership is crucial and highly related to all other effectiveness variables. School effectiveness is not a set of individual conditions but rather an interaction among many variables which contribute to an environment which is conducive to learning. It is doubtful if this school could have had a quality instructional program without the strong leadership that was evident in the planning and implementation of the program.

Leadership ability included more than a set of skills. The manner in which these skills were used was extremely important. The principal had gained the confidence and respect of most members of the school community. He seemed to be uniformly liked by everyone. Even interview questions which were designed to identify weaknesses (e.g.,

"Describe the principal's greatest weakness"), were often turned around to reflect a positive characteristic -- for example a third grade teacher responded "Trying to please everyone." Although the school community did not criticize the principal, he was self-critical in a way that revealed positive characteristics. In response to the question "What areas do you think you need improvement?", he responded:

> In a lot of areas. In a school like this so much depends on your ability to communicate with people who may not view you as a person who has their best interests at heart. That's an area -- to be able to demonstrate to everyone that I am sincere and I want to be helpful. That's a difficult area.
>
> My biggest weakness is being decisive when it comes to my faculty. Many times I take the responsibility rather than putting it on them. That's probably my biggest weakness. Turning it back on them and letting them do the thing rather then relieving the burden and doing it myself.

Interview questions were designed to investigate the meaning of each of the effectiveness variables. The following part of the paper will present responses from various members of the school which indicate the role of the principal, expectations for students, and the quality of the instructional program.

When asked to describe his role, the principal responded:

> I've always maintained that a principal of an elementary school has to be perceived as the head teacher of the school, particularly by his staff. If I require that they do something, I think it is fair that I be able to do the same thing myself and demonstrate it. It is important for staff support to be perceived as a colleague in the same profession. I want to be viewed as a teacher and not as a manager. I want to be knowledgeable about curriculum and to be able to discuss materials and methods with the teachers. I want to be recognized as a good teacher.

The role of administrator as teacher was verified by teachers although they defined the principal's role in a broader sense, such as "captain of the ship." Below are teacher responses to the question concerning the role of the principal.

6TH GRADE TEACHER:

> People feel that principals are no longer in the teaching situation and don't really know what teaching is all about. I've seen Mr. __ teach and he's an excellent teacher and that makes me feel a lot better. Now I know that he is not just saying that you should do a certain thing a certain way he knows how to do it. ....He has always been fair to me and in most cases I think other teachers would agree that he is a fair person. He will bend if you bend to help him. It's give and take on both sides.

4TH GRADE TEACHER:

> The thing I admire the most about him is that he likes kids. And the kids know that he likes kids and he is always there for them. He's always around the building when he is here; he is part of the school. He just doesn't sit in his office. He's not an authoritative figure. Although he does command authority, commands respect. He visits the kids and does things with them -- visits classrooms, he's around the floors, he's around the office, he is reachable to staff and to children.

A parent was asked what the principal is like:

> He hovers over everything. You can always tell when he has his eye over everything, gathering things, and trying to sort things out. He is on top of things and he doesn't let things go. If he sees something that needs to be taken care of, he gets it done.

Students perceived the principal as a friendly and involved in the workings of the school. In answer to the question on what the principal is like, students responded in much the same way.

5TH GRADE FEMALE:

> He's nice. I like him. The reason I like him is because he's a nice principal. He walks around sometimes and looks at the bulletin boards. He's been giving us different kinds of contests.

When the nurse was asked what kinds of things the principal does, she replied:

> He's everywhere. He makes himself a part of every person in the school. You never know where you're going to find him. He is out in the school yard with the kids, in the lunchroom. In classroom, he takes lessons from the teachers and teaches them different things. He's in there with parents, the counselor working out problems. He's a go-getter when it comes to programs. Everything that comes down the pike gets in this school.

Much research has examined the effects teacher expectations have on student performance (Cooper, 1979). Although Cooper claims that there is scant evidence indicating that expectations bias student performance, a substantial literature suggests that expectations can sustain performance at undesirable levels. Also, classroom observations reveal consistent patterns of differential teacher behavior toward high- and low-expectation students (Brophy and Good, 1970).

Interview data and observations revealed that expectations were generally high for children in this study, but there was definite bias toward students who displayed the proper or "good" attitude. It appears that a student's attitude and behavior was as important or more important to success than academic abilities. School personnel and students talked about "good" and "bad" attitudes. Thus students with average or above average abilities might be excluded from placement in higher level academic tracks if they demonstrated behavior associated with a "bad" attitude, e.g., insolence, disinterest, poor attendance.

In talking about the expectations, the principal said:

> We have something a little different here. We have Academics Plus children, and they have an aspiration to finish high school already. They have a positive attitude toward school. Everyone of these children expects to graduate. There are classes of other children not in Academics Plus classes who are disillusioned with school already. They are under-achieving. They might not feel competent. We are trying to put them in other programs to get the flame of interest in school rekindled.

When asked how children were assigned to Academics Plus Classrooms, the principal replied:

> It is not always on scholastic aptitude -- the criteria includes good work habits, motivation, interest, parental involvement.

A third grade female teacher felt she had the least success with:

> Those that have a negative attitude, hostile, I guess. They just really don't want to be here and after trying several different methods to try to get them to be in school to learn to cooperate and to be a part of the school, I just tend to give up. And those, too, that I don't get any support from the home, if a problem arises and I have to contact the parents and there is no response.

A fourth grade teacher responded to the type of student he has the most success with:

> Students who have a good attitude regardless of their ability. The attitude the child has when he comes to school in the morning, if he's happy, he'll learn.

A parent said:

> The problem that concerns me most is the attitude of the children. I think a lot of them are not being taught manners -- simple things we were taught, like to be courteous.

Students are aware of the importance of the proper attitude and could describe behavior which was considered representative of a bad attitude. For example, the following are responses to:

"What are the rules for school and classroom behavior?"

4TH GRADER -- Bein good. Listening to the teacher and don't get out of your seat.

6TH GRADER -- No foolin around. No talking back to the teacher. No catchin the attitude and make sure you do your work.

"What's an example of catchin an attitude?"

Like if the teacher says sit down or she is going to call your mother, if you say "sooo" and roll your eyes at her.

Students perceive that good grades are awarded for good behavior, not necessarily achievement. The following are responses to the question, "How do you earn grades for your report card?"

6TH GRADER -- If you want to earn good grades you got to hand in your work on time. You got to sit up straight and don't talk to no one.

5TH GRADER -- You have to be quiet, be a nice student and know how to write and read and stuff.

6TH GRADER -- You have to be another Dorothy P_____. Because she doesn't talk to nobody. She gets her work finished very quick.

"How do you know how you're doing in school each day?"

5TH GRADER -- Make sure the teacher doesn't say nothing to you.

5TH GRADER -- Be quiet, sit in your seat, don't talk. If someone talks to you just ignore them and then she won't holler at you.

6TH GRADER -- Like she says you been doing very good all day. I've been doing very good all this week. That's nice and I'm going to tell your mother about it.

4TH GRADER -- The teacher has a pad and you get marks for talking. If we don't get any, that's when we get a good grade.

Summary

Based on observations and interviews one "effective" school was studied to determine the conditions relating to school effectiveness. Although research has identified many variables related to school effectiveness, strong leadership appears to be the most crucial factor. This school had a strong administrator whose leadership permeated the entire workings of the school. The climate, expectations, academic standards, and parent-school relationships were set primarily by him. Students were expected to perform well and the curriculum was designed to emphasize the basic subjects. Moreover, expectations related to affective student characteristics as well as to cognitive abilities. There was close monitoring of student progress with regular communication between the school and home.

An ecological analysis of an "effective" school provided an in-depth study of a school environment and facilitated the examination of complex interacting variables. Although research has identified variables related to school effectiveness, it is not always known what they mean behaviorally. What is meant by a strong leader? How does a strong leader behave? Through interviews and observations some of these questions have been answered in this study. The study has also raised some important questions. The possession of the right attitude seems to be especially important in this predominantly black lower-economic school. How are attitudes acquired and what part does the school play in creating and maintaining attitudes? Are these attitudes just as important in middle class schools or is ability

the criterion of success? Ecological psychology can facilitate in-depth study of the school environment and help to provide new insights to the complex problems facing inner-city schools.

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Appendix

Questionnaire: Teachers/Staff

I. General - to all interviewees (parenthesis is student version of same question)

1. How would you describe (tell about) your school to a stranger, someone who knows nothing about it?

2. What is the most positive thing you can say about the school? (What do you like best about your school?)

3. What is the one problem in the school that concerns you most? (What do you like least about your school?)

II. Expectation

E1. What percent of your students do you expect to graduate from high school?

E2. What percent do you expect to go on to post-high education?

E3. What is the over-all level of achievement of the school in relationship to national standards?

E4. Has this level of achievement changed within the last five years? Why?

E5. What level of achievement would you predict within the next five years?

E6. How are students assigned to classes?

E7. What kind of students do you have the most success with?

E8. What kind of students do you have the least success with?

E9. If you were choosing a profession today, what would you choose? Why?

Teachers/Staff continued

III. Leadership (Principal's Role)

A. Role

L1. Describe the role of the principal Mr. _____.

B. Time

L2. In a typical day, what are the kinds of things the principal does?

L3. How much time does he spend in classrooms?

L4. What do you think he spends the most time on?

C. Staff Relationship

L5. Describe your relationship with the principal.

L6. Describe his relationship with students.

L7. Describe his relationship with parents.

L8. What is his relationship with his superiors at the Board of Education?

L9. Describe the principal's greatest strength.

L10. Describe the principal's greatest weakness.

Teachers/Staff continued

Climate

A. Rules

C1. What are the rules for school and classroom behavior?

B. Classroom Seating Organization

C2. How is seating arranged in your classroom?

C. Class Independent and Group Work

C3. When should students work independently in your classroom?

C4. When should students work in groups?

C5. Approximately what percent of time do students work in groups?

Instruction

I1. What do you think should be emphasized most in the curriculum?

I2. What percentage of time do you spend on the various subjects?

I3. What subjects do students seem to enjoy the most?

I4. Is there a school or school district policy concerning how much time per day should be spent on various subjects?

I5. Do you stick to that schedule?

Teachers/Staff continued

VI. Evaluation

A. Grading

EV.1. How do you decide students' grades on report cards?

B. Regular Grading

EV.2. Do you evaluate on a regular basis?

How do you do this?

C. Reinforcement

EV.3. How do you reward appropriate behavior?

EV.4. How do you discourage inappropriate behavior?

VII. Parental Involvement

P1. Describe your contacts with parents.

P2. About what percent of the families come to the Home/School Association Meetings?

P3. About what percent of the families do you think are actively involved in the school?

P4. Is there a difference in level of achievement in students whose parents show interest in school?

P5. How would you describe the community?